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Ku-klux: The Birth Of The Klan During Reconstruction

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Review

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Parsons, Elaine Frantz *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction*.
University of North Carolina Press, \$34.95 ISBN 9781469625423

Born in Violence, Remade in Terror: The KKK and the National Imagination

With *Ku-Klux*, Elaine Frantz Parsons has made a substantial contribution not only to our understanding of the Klan's origins, but to the deeper meanings behind the national perceptions of this secret, terrorist organization as it circulated in the pages of northern newspapers during the era of Reconstruction. Though the author accepts the general chronology of the original Klan, established by Allen Trelease in *White Terror*, Parsons focuses on the discourse surrounding Klan violence rather than the group's organizational features. She demonstrates that Ku-Klux violence was "embedded in a broader national culture," rather than an organic creation born solely of the American South (20). At its core, this book is a product of the cultural turn and it uncovers the cultural ramifications of postwar white fury and how it manifested itself in, and was explained by, northern and southern newspapers.

The book is arranged in seven chapters with an introduction and conclusion. Parsons focuses on four major northern newspapers in this study: the *Chicago Times* (Democratic), the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, the *New York Times*, and the *New York Tribune* (all Republican, though with different degrees of support for the party's "radical" arm). To prove the interest of the northern press in the Ku-Klux Klan, Parsons identifies more than three thousand articles published in these northern papers before 1873. In addition to newspaper analysis, Parsons also presents the findings of federal investigations and the testimonies taken from the African American victims of Ku-Klux violence and their white allies. Beyond more traditional data such as this, Parsons employs multiple "visualization[s] of the connections" between criminals in Union, South Carolina (the location of study in the last two chapters) and men of property in order to

demonstrate cross-class interests within the local white community. Each visualization utilizes network metrics via Gephi – a digital analysis tool which allows users to input data and arrange it into visualizations in order to reconstruct and clarify the configuration of a particular social group. Through this type of analysis Parsons shows just how connected white outlaws and elites could have been, and often times were, by locating prominent members of a subculture of violent criminals – whose names appeared most frequently in the Union County courthouse records – with men of higher social standing, such as a local hotel proprietor, for example. This book, then, represents a welcome way to combine multiple historical methods into a cogent narrative.

In the first chapter, Parsons revisits and challenges the truths historians have generally accepted regarding the origins of the first Ku-Klux, however indistinct, which was formed in Pulaski, Tennessee. Rather than formed by a group of ruffians, Parsons argues that men such as Frank McCord – local publisher of the *Pulaski Citizen* – were elite members of the community. Rather than well-organized and politically oriented, as historians have previously agreed, the Pulaski Klan was not only ineffective and mostly performative, but the progenitor's efforts at self-publicity failed to reach a larger audience. Only once rumblings of the Ku-Klux entered the national press did the organization gain general attention and thus a reputation for organization and violence.

In the second and third chapters, Parsons describes the concerted violence perpetrated by the Ku-Klux from 1868 to 1871, and how it attempted to redefine white and black manhood in the South as well as the nation at large. Of utmost importance, the author details how these men used “physical force to break down specific bodies that housed memories, sensations, words, and wills and that enabled them to feed and house themselves and their dependents” (72). The very mystery that the Ku-Klux evoked with masks and bizarre costumes – sometimes men even donned women's clothes – was meant not only to intimidate their victims, but also as a way to define themselves and to project that identity into the national imagination. When federal investigators ventured to southern towns to collect victim testimony of Ku-Klux violence, the depositions often reinforced the idea of racial inferiority as those testifying curtailed their words as a means to remain safe in the communities where they continued to live after investigators departed. Ku-Kluxism exhibited multiple cultural meanings, Parsons argues, including the broader message of recalcitrance and obstructionism for radical Republicans in Washington.

In the fourth and fifth chapters Parsons fleshes out the motivations and interpretations of printing Ku-Klux stories in northern newspapers, as well as how the idea of the Klan evolved over time. Democrats and Republicans interpreted instances of Ku-Klux violence in accordance with their own political goals. As Parsons writes, Democrats favored “an organization less robust and political and Republicans...one more robust and political” (153). Of utmost interest, Ku-Klux discourse became a lens through which to view – and criticize – the expanding nation-state. Federal investigations of Ku-Klux violence in the South only bolstered burgeoning ideas of the government’s growth as well as its supposed overreach with the Enforcement Acts, for example. Parsons also powerfully asserts that skepticism and outright denial of the Klan “became a way for Americans to critique governmental information-gathering mechanisms and the postwar press as unreliable” (182). That national presses battled over the actions and messages of the Klan suggests that the organization had a national presence well before the Second Klan of the 1920s, if only temporarily.

The final two chapters return from the arena of publicly constructed identity to the actuality of Ku-Klux violence in Union County, South Carolina. Parsons describes how the advent of able African American leadership challenged the power of whites within the South Carolina Upcountry. It was in response to this perceived threat to white authority that, Parsons argues, forced Union County elites to acquiesce to the interests of the white criminal underclass. Through African American participation in the Republican Party, including Union Leagues and black militias, whites became fearful of black-on-white violence and took forceful measures to disperse black organization in general. Prominent African American Republicans served as state representatives and local judges, and informal associations of African American men who provided protection for their leaders displayed the power of effective black associations. Replete with picnic raids, jail raids, and alleged ambushes, the violent clashes in Union County’s history serve as an appropriate laboratory within which to test how national discourse affected local circumstance. Ku-Klux response to the actions of African Americans and the portrayal of this violence in the press attracted federal attention. State officials and federal authorities imprisoned a healthy number of Ku-Klux culprits under the Enforcement Acts, yet white Democrats ultimately attained their goal of removing African Americans from power.

This unfortunate paradox captures what is at the center of *Ku-Klux*: the emergence of the Klan and its portrayal in the national press “marked the inevitability of white dominance and the tragicomic nature of black aspiration”

(304). Though common violence would remain, the Klan reached its peak and receded in the early 1870s, and white Americans who thought themselves the proper inheritors of power returned to fight over the spoils of supremacy as the pillars of Reconstruction crumbled.

Ku-Klux grapples with complex webs of identity produced on multiple levels, both local and national. For this reason, this book would be a welcome addition to any reading list for a graduate seminar, especially one focusing on cultural history. Also, any scholars interested in the relationship between the nineteenth century press and the public sphere may find this book indispensable. Readers today may relate this episode in Reconstruction with modern culture wars, as Americans continue to debate the origins, meanings, and consequences of violent reactions to racial friction in the United States.

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